

Ronaldo Rejects \$6mn-A-Year Deal to Promote Saudi Tourism: Report

RIYADH (Middle East Eye) – Footballer Cristiano Ronaldo has reportedly turned down a multi-million-dollar opportunity to become the face of Saudi Arabian tourism.

The deal amounted to \$6m per year and is understood to have included Ronaldo's image being used on all promotional material and his making visits to the country, according to the UK's Telegraph newspaper.

Ronaldo's footballing rival Lionel Messi has also been approached by the kingdom's tourism authority, but his view on the proposal is not yet known, the paper said.

Representatives of Ronaldo and Messi refused to discuss the matter when approached by The Telegraph.

Sports and entertainment have formed part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy to diversify the economy and improve its international reputation.

However, groups such as Amnesty International have long campaigned against what it says is the kingdom's use of such connections to distract from its human rights violations.

Saudi Arabia staged the Spanish Super Cup in Jeddah in 2020, with Messi's Barcelona competing for



Demonstrators dressed as Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and U.S. President Donald Trump (C) protest outside the White House in Washington, DC, on October 19, 2018.

the trophy alongside Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid and Valencia.

In October, a coalition of human rights groups called for a boycott of the first Ladies European Tour golf event being held in Saudi Arabia over concerns it would be used to "sportswash" Riyadh's record on women's rights.

Also last year, Amnesty cautioned against Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund's attempted takeover of Newcastle United FC of the English Premier League.

The takeover ultimately failed after several months of waiting to pass the league's owners and directors' test.

Amnesty International has also raised concerns over this year's Saudi Formula One race planned for Jeddah.

Earlier this week, Ronaldo became the highest scorer of all time, after the 760th goal of his career, scored in his team Juventus's 2-0 Italian Super Cup win over Napoli.

Suspicious...

(Continued From Page One)

on Friday, according to a White House statement.

Sullivan said Washington wants to check that the Taliban side is "living up to its commitments to... reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders."

The U.S. reached a deal with the Taliban in February last year on the withdrawal of 12,000 American troops from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban to halt attacks on American forces.

Under the deal, the former President Donald Trump's administration promised to bring the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to zero by May 2021.

Sediq Sediqqi, deputy interior minister and former spokesman to President Ashraf Ghani, on Friday said the agreement had failed to achieve its stated goals.

Last week, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan went down to 2,500, the lowest level of American forces there since 2001.

International calls for a ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban have increased as violence levels have surged in the country over the past months.

A report said last year that Taliban bombings and other assaults had increased by 70 percent after the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

On Thursday, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi called on the new U.S. president to follow up on the ongoing Afghan peace process and American troops withdrawal from the country.

"I think they [Biden administration] should realize there is an opportunity in Afghanistan and they should persevere with what was initiated and not reverse things," Qureshi told Qatar's Al Jazeera Arabic broadcaster.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 under the pretext of the so-called war on terror, overthrowing the Taliban regime.

Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Washington has spent more than two trillion dollars waging the war on the impoverished country, according to some estimates. Over 2,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed.

Iran...

(Continued From Page 2)

lifted by the accord and launched a push to fully destroy the agreement by trying to dissuade the remaining signatories from staying in the agreement.

Under the pressure, the European co-signatories shirked from fulfilling their contractual obligations, prompting Tehran suspend parts of its own commitments under Article 26 and 36 of the JCPOA.

In an op-ed article published Friday by American magazine Foreign Affairs, Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif urged the new U.S. president to end his predecessor's fruitless pressure policy, warning that the "window of opportunity would not be open" for the new White House team forever.

Elsewhere in his interview, Araqchi said the Persian Gulf's security can be the subject of dialogue among regional countries without foreign interference, stressing, "The security of the region can be discussed collectively."

Araqchi also pointed to good relations between Iran and Italy that have always been based on mutual respect.

"Italy has always been one of Iran's top trading partners. If the sanctions are lifted, economic relations between our two countries will be able to resume."

Even if the sanctions remain in place, Araqchi said, "the two countries will still have the possibility of creating mechanisms to strengthen their relations."

Saudi...

(Continued From Page 2)

Saudi Arabia launched a devastating military aggression against Yemen in March 2015 in collaboration with a number of its allied states, and with arms and logistics support from the U.S. and several Western countries.

The aim was to return to power a Riyadh-backed former regime and defeat the popular Houthi Ansarullah movement that has been running state affairs in the absence of an effective government in the Arab country.

The Saudi war has failed to achieve its goals, but killed tens of thousands of innocent Yemenis and destroyed the impoverished country's infrastructure. The UN refers to the situation in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Pandemic Forces Jordanian Children Into Labor Market

AMMAN (AFP) – Omar's heart sinks when he trudges past his closed school gates in the Jordanian capital Amman -- now part of his trip to work, to repair and clean kerosene heaters.

The 14-year-old, who dreams of becoming a pilot, is one of many minors experts say have been forced prematurely into the labor market.

Schools throughout Jordan have been closed for nearly a year now, and the economic fallout from the novel coronavirus pandemic has eaten into breadwinners' ability to feed their families.

"As school is shut, I help my family financially," said Omar, sporting a sweater and dirty jeans as he cleaned a heater with

his blackened hands.

He works exhausting 12-hour days at the workshop, and collapses into bed after a shower and a quick evening meal.

Overall, the work "doesn't bother me", he said.

"What is unbearable is the smell of kerosene... (it) doesn't go away."

He earns three dinars (around \$4.25) a day, which helps pay the family's monthly rent of 130 dinars.

His contribution is vital because his father, a day laborer, has struggled to find work due to the coronavirus downturn.

But Omar has not given up hope, and said he was determined to return to school as soon as possible.

"I would love to continue my studies" and eventually become a pilot, he said.

"I don't want the coronavirus to destroy my dream."

The education ministry has announced a return to classes next month for kindergarten and some elementary school levels, as well for students in their final year of high school.

Everyone else will have to wait until March.

UN children's agency UNICEF said that while it had no hard statistics, it believed many Jordanian children had been forced into precarious work since the pandemic began -- despite it being forbidden to employ those under 16.

Some 76,000 children were

already working in Jordan according to the last official count, published in 2016.

"When we see children and when we speak to people, we are concerned that the numbers are increasing," said Tanya Chapuisat, UNICEF's country representative in Jordan.

"It would seem logical... because we know the levels of poverty are increasing" during the coronavirus crisis, she added.

The official poverty rate in Jordan was 15.7 percent last autumn, but the World Bank has warned this will increase by 11 percentage points over "the short term".

Experts fear child labor rates will surge even higher.

Hamas to Hold Internal Elections in Parallel With National Elections

GAZA STRIP (Anadolu) – The Palestinian Islamic resistance movement Hamas is planning to hold its internal elections at the same time as preparing for national elections, informed sources say.

The sources told Anadolu Agency that the Hamas Shura Council turned down a proposal for delaying the internal elections for several months in order to prepare for the national elections.

Last Friday, Palestinian Authority (PA), Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah President Mahmoud Abbas issued a presidential decree ordering the Elections Committee to hold the parliamentary elections on 22 May, presidential elections on 31 July and the Palestinian Na-

tional Council on 31 August.

An informed source said that Hamas had already started its preparations for the internal elections, noting that they are expected to be completed by 25 February.

Other sources said that Hamas prisoners inside the Zionist regime's jails have already completed their elections. The source did not reveal names because this remains confidential until the end of the elections in Gaza, West Bank and abroad.

The Palestinian factions are holding a joint meeting in Cairo on 5 February to discuss a mechanism that will guarantee the success of the elections.

Turkey's Religious Authority Bans 'Evil-Eye' Charms

ANKARA (Al Jazeera) – Turkey's religious authority has proclaimed the use of talismans to ward off "the evil eye" prohibited under Islam.

The proliferation of the eye-shaped blue glass amulets in Turkey is widespread, as is the belief in their ability to ward off malevolent or jealous intentions.

In a recently published fatwa – a legal or general decree by a religious authority or court – the Diyanet, which governs all matters relating to Islam in Turkey, denounced the use of the ornaments, known locally as nazarlik or nazar boncugu, as forbidden.

"Although the nature and condition of the evil eye are not known precisely, it is accepted by religion that some people can create

negative effects with their gaze," the Diyanet said in an advisory published on its website.

"In our religion, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs that attribute the ultimate influence on anything other than Allah are forbidden. For this reason, it is not permissible to wear evil eye amulets and similar things around the neck or anywhere for the purpose of benefiting from them."

Belief in the power of the evil eye to cause harm dates back to ancient times and is widespread across the Mediterranean and parts of Asia.

The logic behind this conviction is that success or admirable objects inspire envy, which can be transmitted in a harmful gaze. Amulets are used to intercept the curse and protect the

wearer.

The tradition is believed to date back to at least 3300 BCE and has become widely adopted in Turkey.

Nese Yildiran, professor of art history at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University, said the blue color of the beads relates to the sky god of the Central Asian Seljuk Turks.

The charms are given to newborn babies – as new additions to the family are thought to be especially susceptible to the evil eye – and are also worn as jewelry.

More commonly though, they adorn homes, workplaces, cars and buses – more or less any place where they can be hung. In a sign of the digital era catching up with ancient folklore, a nazarlik emoji was created in 2018.